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Sweet & Bitter: Exploring Contemporary 'Girl Photography' from Japan

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Abstract:

On March 14, 2008, the Center for Study of Women at UCLA sponsored a special talk at the Hammer Museum by curator Hiromi Nakamura on recent trends in "Girl Photography" from Japan. The talk was part of three days of events at UCLA looking at the growing influence of Japanese pop culture in the West. Later that same day, works by two of the artists featured in the talk, Mika Ninagawa and Mikiko Hara, were displayed at a reception at the Anderson School of Management. The show was the first time that the work of these two emerging women artists had been publicly shown on the West Coast.



sweet & bitter

EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY "GIRL PHOTOGRAPHY" FROM JAPAN

BY ADRIAN FAVELL



Mikiko Hara, Untitled (Agnes Dei) 1998



Mika Ninagawa, Mika 04-05-B2-1 (Anna Tsuchiya) 2004



Mikiko Hara, Untitled (Is As It) 1996

On March 14, 2008, the Center for Study of Women at UCLA sponsored a special talk at the Hammer Museum by curator Hiromi Nakamura on recent trends in "Girl Photography" from Japan. The talk was part of three days of events at UCLA looking at the growing influence of Japanese pop culture in the West. Later that same day, works by two of the artists featured in the talk, Mika Ninagawa and Mikiko Hara, were displayed at a reception at the

Anderson School of Management. The show was the first time that the work of these two emerging women artists had been publicly shown on the West Coast.

Hiromi Nakamura's talk was published in full in the color program

that accompanied the events. This is still available at the following website, along with images shown at the exhibition: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/favell/jwave6.pdf> Printed copies are also available on request from Adrian Favell.

In the talk, Nakamura traces the emergence in the mid 1990s of a new generation of highly fêted, young female photographers in Japan, that drew upon and reflected the extraordinary youth street culture developing in Tokyo at that time.



Mika Ninagawa,
Mika 04-106-B2-2 2004

Often coming from backgrounds in fashion or design, these new artists used public competitions and commercial sponsorship to rise to prominence, with a brash female photography that celebrated a new, assertive culture of, by and for women in contemporary Japan. The media loved the image of “girl power” it suggested, and their offhand and sometimes confrontational

diary-style techniques seized the public’s attention, while being quickly absorbed by mainstream photographers. But there was also pathos in the rapid rise and fall of some of these stars. Both Ninagawa and Hara, however, have gone on to forge a confident mature style, that sees them now being recognized as international artists in their own right.

The talk was followed by a long and fascinating panel discussion, which we are very pleased to now make available online, in both text and podcast form. The panel featured four additional speakers: Charlotte Cotton, curator of photography at LACMA; Laura Miller, professor of anthropology at Loyola University, Chicago; London-based artist and writer, Sharon Kinsella; and sociologist Yoshitaka Mouri from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.

Charlotte Cotton sketches the historical context of photography in Japan, and its distinctive relation to other fine arts when compared to the West, that has continued to the present and accounts for much of its striking originality. Laura Miller explores the emergence of a bold, pushy and often irreverent girls’ culture in Japan since the 1990s, out of which these photographers have emerged. Sharon Kinsella then suggests some of the sometimes disturbing ambiguities of Japanese girls’ art as it is consumed in Japan and (increasingly) the West, because of its complicated relation to the parallel voyeuristic fascination of male consumers for this otherwise inaccessible and gender specific girls’ aesthetic. Yoshitaka Mouri, meanwhile, locates the movement in relation to the emergent ideology of creativity in Japan and worldwide,

that celebrates the life of “freeter” [free-working] “creators”, while generating a subversive art that needs to be appreciated outside of formal white museum walls. A lively Q & A session follows that further develops these themes. The text of the panel discussion (in pdf format) can to be found here at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/favell/S&Bdiscussion.pdf>

The live podcast of the full two-hour talk and panel discussion (in two parts) can be found here: <http://www.csw.ucla.edu/podcasts.html>

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